

The AUCTION BLOCK

REX BEACH



SYNOPSIS.

Peter Knight, defeated for political office in his town, decides to venture New York in order that the family fortunes might benefit by the expected rise of his charming daughter, Lorelei. A well-known critic interviews Lorelei Knight, now stage beauty with Bergman's Review, for a special article. Her coin-hunting mother outlines Lorelei's ambitions, but Blosson, the press agent, later adds his information. Lorelei attends Millionaire Hammon's gorgeous entertainment. She meets Merkle, a wealthy dyspeptic. Bob Wharton comes uninvited. Lorelei discovers a blackmail plot against Hammon, in which her mother is involved. Merkle and Lorelei have an auto wreck. The blackmailers besmear her good name. Lorelei learns her mother is an unscrupulous plotter. She finds in Adoree Demorest a real friend, and finds Bob Wharton is likable. Lorelei leaves her family and goes to live alone. Lorelei and drunken Bob Wharton are tricked into marriage. Lila shoots and wounds Hammon seriously.

Adoree Demorest, the dancer, and Campbell Pope, the critic, once more. He is the man who told all New York through his dramatic column that she was the most shameless woman on the stage. Really a good girl, she naturally despises him for thus besmirching her. Well, they meet at dinner. How the barrier between them is broken and how they begin a friendship is told in delightful manner in this installment.

Hammon has been shot. The problem is to get him home unseen. Bob Wharton rents a hack and drives it himself.

CHAPTER XV—Continued.

Bob reined in and leaped from his box. Merkle had the cab door open and was holding Hammon from his seat.

"Have you got the key?" Bob asked, swiftly.

"Yes. Help me! He's fainted, I think."

They lifted the half-conscious man out, then with him between them struggled up the steps; but Hammon's feet dragged; he hung very heavy in their arms.

Merkle was not a strong man; he was panting, and his hands shook as he fumbled with the lock. The key escaped him and tinkled upon the stone.

"Hurry! Here comes the watchman!" Bob was gazing over his shoulder at the slowly approaching figure.

A second but briefer delay, and they stood in the gloom of the marble foyer hall. Then they shuffled across the floor to the great, curving stairway. Hammon had assured them that there would be no one in the house except Orson, his man, and some of the kitchen servants, the others having followed their mistress to the country; nevertheless the rescuers' nerves were painfully taut, and they tried to go as silently as burglars; when they finally gained the library, they were drenched with perspiration. Merkle switched on the lights; they deposited the wounded man on a couch and bent over him.

Hammon was not dead. Merkle felt his way into the darkened regions at the rear and returned with a glass of spirits. Under his and Bob's ministrations the unconscious man opened his eyes.

"You got me here, didn't you?" he whispered, as he took in his surroundings. "Now go—everything is all right."

"We're not going to leave you," Merkle said, positively.

"No," echoed Bob. "I'll wake up Orson while John telephones the doctor."

But Hammon forbade Bob's movement with a frown. It was plain that despite his weakness his mind remained clear.

"Listen to me," he ordered. "Prop me up—put me in that chair. I'm choking." They did as he directed. "That's better. Now, you mustn't be seen here—either of you. We can't explain." He checked Merkle. "I know best. Go home; it's only two blocks—I'll telephone."

"You'll ring for Orson quick?" Hammon nodded.

"Rotten way to leave a man," Bob mumbled. "I'd rather stick it out and face the music."

"Go, go! You're wasting time," Hammon's brow was wrinkled with pain and anger. "You've been good; now hurry."

Merkle's thin face was marked with deep feeling. "Yes," he agreed. "There's nothing else for us to do; but tell Orson to 'phone me quick. I'll be back here in five minutes." Then he and Bob stole out of the house as quietly as they had stolen in.

They got into the cab and drove away without exciting suspicion. Merkle alighted two blocks up the avenue and sped to his own house; Bob turned his faded nag westward through the sunken road that led toward the Regency and Lorelei.

The owner of the equipage was waiting patiently, and there still lacked something of the allotted hour when the exchanged garments had been

for the evening meal. In view of all this she answered: "Yes, to dinner. Please, please come." Lorelei was not quite sure that Bob would consent to dine in the modest little home, but under the circumstances idleness was maddening, so she fell to work. This was very different from what she had expected, but—everything was different. Once the marriage had become known to Bob's people and he had thoroughly sobered down, once she had withdrawn from the east of the River, their real life would begin.

Bob was pale and a bit unsteady when he arrived, but Lorelei saw that he suffered only from the effects of his previous debauch. He was extremely self-conscious and uneasy in her presence, though he kissed her with a brave show of confidence.

"I galloped into the bank just as they slammed the doors," he explained, "but my bookkeeping is rotten."

"Are you trying to tell me that you have overdrawn?"

"Exactly. But I drew against the old gentleman, as usual, so on with the dance. What's the—er—idea of the apron?"

"It's nearly dinner time."

Bob's eyes opened with surprise. "Why, we're going to Delmonico's."

"I'd—rather do this if you don't mind." She eyed him appealingly. "I don't feel equal to going out tonight. I'm—afraid."

His glance brightened with admiration. "Well, you look stunning in that get-up, and I'd hate to see you change it. Do you mean to say you can cook?"

"Not well, but I can fry almost anything. Mother has a maid. I couldn't afford two."

"I love fried things," he assured her, with a twinkle. "And to think you're going to cook for me! That's an experience for both of us. Let's have some fried roast beef and fried corn on the cob with fried salad and cheese."

"Don't tease," she begged, uncertainly. "I hardly know what I'm doing, and I thought this would keep me busy until theater time."

He extended a hand timidly and patted her arm, saying with unexpected gentleness:

"Please don't worry. It was a terrible night for all of us. When I think of it I'm sure it must have been a dream. I saw Merkle. He got back to Hammon's house ahead of the doctor, and nobody suspects the truth. But the Street is in chaos, and all of Hammon's companies are feeling the strain."

"Shouldn't you have been at business on such a day?"

Bob shrugged carelessly. "I'm only a 'joke' broker. The governor thinks a firm name looks well on my cards. I hope he doesn't lose more than a million in this flurry—it won't improve his disposition. But—wait till he learns I've married a girl who can fry things—By the way—" Bob paused. "I invited a friend to dine with us tonight."

Lorelei was less dismayed than he had expected. "So have I," she said.

"I thought it might be pleasant for you," he explained, a bit awkwardly, "inasmuch as we're not very well-acquainted. I saw before I went out that you were—er—embarrassed—and—and—" He flushed boyishly, scarcely conscious of the delicacy that had

prompted his action. "Anyhow, he's gone home to put on a clean sweater."

"You don't mean you asked—?"

"Campbell Pope; yes. I met him, and he looked hungry. He's coming here at six." For almost the first time in Bob's society Lorelei laughed out clearly.

"And I asked Adoree Demorest," she said.

Bob grinned and then laughed with her. "Fine!" he cried. "Both members of this club. Really, this ought to make the best finish—light seen in New York for many a day."

Adoree's surprise at finding Robert Wharton in her friend's apartment was intense, and when she learned the truth she was for once in her life speechless. She could only stare from one to the other, wavering between consternation and delight. Finally she sat down limply.

"I—I'd have brought a present if I'd known," she managed to say.

"Are you going to wish us luck?" Bob inquired.

"Luck! You've both got it. She's

the best girl in the world, and you're—"

Adoree hesitated, and continued to stare, round-eyed. "I didn't think you'd—I didn't think she'd—I don't know what I thought or didn't think. But—Jimminy! Married!" When Lorelei led her into the bedroom to lay off her wraps the thunderstruck young woman had more nearly recovered herself.

"Why, he's worth millions," she exclaimed, in a whisper—"billions! I don't know how to talk to him—or you, for that matter. Shall I call you 'my lady' or 'your honor,' or—I didn't dress for dinner either; I suppose I should have worn the crown jewels."

"You're going to wear an apron and help me scorch the dinner," Lorelei laughed.

As Lorelei explained the reasons for tonight's program, Adoree saw for the first time the weariness in her friend's eyes, the pallor of her cheeks, the trem-

ulous droop of her lower lip. Seizing Lorelei by the shoulders, she held her off as the target for a searching gaze.

"Tell me, did they make you marry him?" she inquired, fiercely. It was plain to whom she referred.

"No."

"When! I'm glad to hear that. You love him, don't you?"

The answer came readily enough, and the blue eyes did not flinch, but the smile was a trifle fixed and the cheeks remained colorless.

"Why, of course. He's very nice."

"Lorelei!" Miss Demorest's fingers tightened; her voice was tragic, but she had no chance to say more, for Bob called just then from the living room:

"Hurry back, girls. There's something burning, and I can't find the emergency brake."

When Adoree finally came forth in one of Lorelei's aprons—really a fetching garment, more like a house dress than an apron—Bob told her whom they were expecting as the other guest.

She paused with a bread-knife upraised.

"That—viper?" she cried.

"Campbell isn't a viper; he's a cricket—a dramatic cricket," declared Bob.

Adoree began to undo the buttons at her back, but Bob seized her hands.

"Let go. I'll blow up if I see that creature," she exclaimed, in a kind of subdued shout.

Argument proved vain until Lorelei told her firmly: "You owe it to yourself, dear. And we won't let you go."

The dancer ceased her struggles, her brows puckered.

"Seriously, now, Lorelei has told me everything, and I want Campbell to acknowledge his mistake," said Bob. "The public has swallowed that royalty hoax, but there's no use deceiving him."

Despite her show of bravery Adoree was panic-stricken when the bell rang and Bob went to the door to explain the change of plan and invite Pope in. He entered the living room with a hand extended and a smile upon his lips, then halted as if frozen. By the time he had burst into a gentle perspiration.

As for Miss Demorest, she took a grim delight in his discomfort, and prepared to blast him with sarcasm, to wither him with her contempt when the moment came. Meanwhile she listened as the two men talked, turning up her nose when Pope scored Broadway with his usual bitterness.

"He thinks that's smart," she reflected; but she, too, detested the Great Trite Way, and his words expressed her own distaste so aptly that she could think of no argument sufficiently biting to confound him. She deliberately framed a stinging reference to his pose in the matter of dress, though in frankness she had to admit that he wore his gray sweater vest with an air of genuine comfort and unconsciousness.

Pope was noticeably ill at ease. He was conscious of Miss Demorest's hostile eyes, and the pointed manner in which she ignored his presence was disquieting. Bob appeared to enjoy his lack of repose, and offered no relief. At last Pope turned to the piano and fluttered through the stack of sheet music he found there.

"Do you play?" inquired Bob.

"Yes, Why?"

"You look as if you did—you're kind of—badly nourished. Know any rag-time?"

The musician groaned. After a moment he murmured, "I improvise a good deal." The instrument, perhaps for the first time in its life, began to vibrate and ring to something besides

the clatter of the day. Once he had found a means of occupying himself, Pope surrendered to his impulse and in a measure forgot his surroundings.

A short time later Lorelei turned from the kitchenette to find Adoree Demorest poised, a salad-bowl in one hand, a wooden spoon gripped in the other, on her face a rapt expression of beatitude.

"Have you rubbed the dish with garlic?" inquired Lorelei.

Adoree roused herself slowly. "Lordy!" she whispered. "I'd give both legs to the knee and one eye if I could play like that. The mean little shrimp!"

The embers of her resentment were still glowing when the four finally seated themselves at the table. A furtive glance in Pope's direction showed that he was studiously avoiding her eyes; she prepared once more to begin the process of faying him.

"You've been away for some time, haven't you?" Bob was asking.

Pope nodded. "I hate New York. I went as far away as I could get, and—managed to return just two jumps ahead of the sheriff. It will take me six months to pay my debts. I'm a grand little business man."

"What was it this time? Mining?"

"No. Poultry." Adoree pricked up her ears.

"You went West, eh?" pursued Bob.

"No. East—Long Island. I saw a great opportunity to make money; so I found a farm on a lake, bought it, and went to raising ducks."

"Ducks!" breathlessly exclaimed Miss Demorest; but her interruption went unnoticed.

Campbell Pope's features shone with the gentle light of a pleasurable remembrance. "It was lovely and quiet out there. The local inhabitants were shy but friendly; they did me no harm. But—it was no place for ducks; they swam all over the pond. They swam all their fat off, and I had the pond dredged and never found an egg."

Miss Demorest giggled audibly; she had lost all interest in her food; she was tingling with excitement.

"Why didn't you fence them in?" she asked.

Pope eyed her for a fleeting instant, then his gaze wavered.

"I fenced in the whole pond to begin with. It nearly broke me."

"A duck shouldn't have much water. What kind were they?"

"Plymouth Rocks, or Holsteins, or Jersey Lillies—anyhow they were white."

"White Pekins?"

The critic frowned argumentatively. "What is a duck for if he isn't to swim? What is his object? We had six on my father's farm, and they swam all the time. Of course, six isn't many, but—"

"Naturally they didn't do well."

Bob Wharton signaled frantically to his wife, but there was no stopping the discussion that had begun to rage back and forth. It lasted until the conclusion of the meal, and it was only with an effort that Adoree tore herself away. She was in her element, and in a little time had won the critic's undivided attention; he listened with absorption; he even made occasional notes.

As the two girls dressed hurriedly for the theater, Adoree confessed: "Golly! I'm glad I stayed. He's not bright; he's perfectly silly about some things, and yet he's the most interesting talker I ever heard. And—can't he play a piano?"

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